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FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9382
INFO RUEHXK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L TEL AVIV 000466

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/11/2017

TAGS: PREL PGOV KISL KPAL IS

SUBJECT: CHIEF ARCHEOLOGIST CONFIRMS EXCAVATIONS TO
CONTINUE OUTSIDE TEMPLE MOUNT/HARAM AL-SHARIF

REF: TEL AVIV 455 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Political Counselor Marc Sievers, reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

¶1. (C) The daily Ha'aretz reported February 12 that Jerusalem Mayor Lupoliansky, after consulting with the Islamic Waqf and the rabbi of the Western Wall, decided to suspend construction of the pedestrian ramp to the Mughrabi Gate, but that archeological excavations related to the project would continue. Chief Israel Antiquities Authority archeologist Baruch Yuval confirmed to Poloff February 12 that the excavation work outside the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif will continue while new consultations are held over the construction of the ramp. Yuval stressed that the two issues -- excavation and construction -- are and would remain separate. He said his team had finished removing the old Israeli-laid concrete at the site and was therefore finished with the heavy earth-moving equipment. "We are now beginning sensitive archeological digging," he said. Yuval also confirmed that the government was moving ahead with plans to install web cameras at the site in order to demonstrate that the Israelis had nothing to hide.

¶2. (C) Jordanian Political Counselor Mohammed Abuwandi confirmed to Polcouns February 12 that the Israelis had consulted with the Jordanians in January about the ramp construction. Abuwandi said, however, that the GOJ had declined to approve the project due to concerns about its timing as well as the general sensitivity surrounding any new Israeli activity around the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. Abuwandi noted that the Jordanians were pleased by the GOI's decision to facilitate the transportation and installation of Salah al-Din's minbar at the Al-Aqsa mosque and were therefore all the more disappointed by the Israelis insistence on going ahead with the Mughrabi Gate ramp project.

¶3. (C) COMMENT: While we hope that the absence of heavy equipment, coupled with Mayor Lupoliansky's decision to open a new consultation process for the Mughrabi bridge construction, will help ease some of the tensions surrounding this emotional issue, at the same time, since the salvage excavation is scheduled to continue, we expect the emotional protests and calls to action by some in the Islamic community to continue. The leader of the northern branch of the Israeli Islamic Movement, Sheikh Ra'ed Salah, in particular is exploiting Islamic sensitivities by spreading conspiratorial rumors about the GOI's true intent.

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JONES